

Practice Profiles for Older Nurses in North Carolina

Findings from the 2001 Survey of Veteran Nurses in North Carolina

June, 2003

Nurses in North Carolina and across the country are aging at a faster rate than the general labor force. Nationally, the average age of registered nurses (RNs) employed in hospitals increased by 5.3 years between 1983 and 1998. During the same period the average age of the general workforce in the US increased by less than 2 years.¹ This is the result of several different factors, including the increased popularity of nursing as a second career choice, the burgeoning opportunities for women in all fields of study, and a temporary decline in the number of new students entering nursing during the late 1990s.

The end result, however, is that approximately 14% of the RNs in North Carolina's nursing workforce were age 55 or older in 2001, and another 31% were between the ages of 45 and 54. Among LPNs, about 18% of the active workforce were age 55 or older in 2001, and another 32% were between the ages of 45 and 54.² Given these facts, it is important to understand the place of these nurses in our health care systems and institutions, and to start planning for the time when these nurses will reduce their work loads or retire altogether.

About the Survey

This report is part of a larger study that examines the extent to which veteran nurses (those aged 46 to 75) in North Carolina are involved in the workforce and how and when they leave full time employment. During the summer of 2001, the North Carolina Center for Nursing surveyed veteran nurses with an active license to practice in North Carolina. Veteran nurses were defined as those whose initial license to practice had been granted in 1985 or earlier (i.e. a 'professional' age of at least 15 years at the time of the survey), regardless of the state where that initial license had been granted; and who were also between the ages of 46 and 75 as of April 1, 2001. Current employment status was not a consideration for inclusion in the sample. Potential cases were grouped into three age categories (46 – 55, 56 – 65, 66 – 75) and organized by regional location of their home address. A random sample of 62 RNs and 62 LPNs was chosen from within each age category and regional location combination, resulting in 1,116 cases in the sample. A total of 645 usable surveys were returned. When the sample size was adjusted for undeliverable surveys, or deceased respondents, the overall response rate was 61%.³ A bias analysis comparing the characteristics of our study respondents to the full population of all licensed RNs and LPNs indicates that the survey results are generally representative of the population of veteran nurses in North Carolina and suggests that we can safely generalize the findings of our studies to this population of nurses.